MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE!

November 23, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 61:10-11
John 6:24-35

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord,...For the Lord is good;..."
--Psalm 100 (RSV)

There is no frustration quite like what we experience when we feel deeply about something and are unable to express it. Children of a Lesser God, the current motion picture version of the play by that name, deals sensitively with the topic. A deaf young woman has taught herself to live in her own world of silence, with no emotional involvements, no vulnerability, no expectations. A teacher forces his way into her isolation, and the story revolves around the incidents of pain and frustration which occur when the expression of feelings is thwarted, misunderstood, truncated by her inability to hear. The teacher loves Bach: the glorious Double Violin Concerto is frequently background music. In a quietly domestic moment - she is busy doing something - he is listening. She says: "Show me the music." And a very strong and touching scene occurs, particularly for those of us who know how difficult it is to get feelings into words, when he tries by bodily movement to show her what the Bach Double sounds like. It's awkward, futile: he tries a few times, several ungraceful gestures, and then gives up. It can't be done.

There is no frustration quite like hearing glorious music on the car radio when you are alone. I love music... I often want to roll down the window and say "Do you hear that?" It's frustrating to see a magnificent sunset, bright moon or starry night and have to be content with the solitary experience until we can share it with someone, express our feelings about it. Expressing what we feel is a real need in us. Half the joy of reading is to express one's feelings about a well-written paragraph, make photocopies and send to your friends. A particularly frustrating experience, I have discovered, is to be sitting in the bleachers on a cold Saturday morning, a solitary spectator at an athletic contest in which one's own child is participating and then he or she does something wonderful and there is no one there to hear you express your pride... "That's my daughter - that's my son."

Love is incomplete until it is expressed. Dante never got around to telling Beatrice...and one wonders if it really was love. Joy is not full until it is expressed. Gratitude is retarded until it is expressed.

A current symbol of our deep need to express our feelings, the human propensity to do so even when nobody wants to listen, is the young man

swaggering through a sidewalk crowd, portable stereo slung over his shoulder, blaring - not only assaulting your privacy, but perhaps desperately trying to induce someone, anyone, to share his feelings, to hear his hopes, his despair, anger, love, joy, all of which are expressed in the music!

The Bible is a great advocate of expressing your feelings, especially about God. In fact, the Bible can get downright pushy about it. We are variously ordered to praise the Lord, to fall down before the Lord, to approach God with gratitude, to wave palm branches, blow trumpets, pluck strings and bang cymbals together for God, to thank God ceaselessly, to join our voices with the voices of nature as little hills shout, trees clap their hands and forests sing a mighty chorus. The Bible, unequivocally urges us to "make a joyful noise to the Lord." There is very little restraint in the Bible when it comes to telling God how one feels.

To praise God, in the idiom of the Bible, is to get together with your neighbors and friends, and clap one another on the back. In addition to its exuberance, praise in the Bible is corporate. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, whose followers knew something about exuberant faith, and became "shouting Methodists" once observed that "there is no solitary religion in the Bible." The imperative to praise God is not an invitation to quiet introspection on the subject of providence. The Psalter, rather, pulls out all the stops, and gives us full organ - "Make a joyful noise - all the lands!"

Much of the Bible seems to have been written by or about people who were slightly overwhelmed by God, almost intoxicated with the sense of God's goodness, hopelessly in love with God, and convinced of the absolute necessity of expressing themselves on the subject - corporately and enthusiastically. There is no better example than the 100th Psalm. It was written for a liturgical procession, apparently, moving toward the great temple in Jerusalem to make a thank offering.

From outside a choir chanted:

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands -
Serve the Lord with gladness."

From inside came the response:

"Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that hath made us."

The choir outside sang:

"Enter the gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise."

And as the gates were opened, the choir inside affirmed:

"The Lord is good.
His steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations."

The first hymn in our hymnal is "Old Hundredth," set to a tune composed by John Calvin's musician and hymn writer, Louis Bourgeois in 1551. We use his tune every Sunday when we sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" - the Doxology. The words to "Old Hundredth," "All people that on earth do dwell," are a paraphrase, phrase by phrase, of Psalm 100, by William Kethe - 1561, a Scottish clergyman who was a friend of John Knox. And so that hymn is one of our precious treasures. It is also the oldest English hymn in use.

One of the theological issues which emerges from the 100th Psalm is its insistence that we ought to praise God - it's almost a moral coercion. Thoughtful people have always wondered why the God of the Bible is always ordering people to love and praise him. If God is all the Bible claims, the reasoning goes, why do people have to be ordered to worship? Isn't it, after all, a little like ordering one's children to be happy, or else? Is God really like an insecure lover who needs constant reassurance that he or she is lovely? In a delightful little book on the Psalms, C. S. Lewis described his irritation with the Bible at this point... "Worst of all," he wrote, "is the suggestion of the very silliest Pagan bargaining." More than once the Psalmist seems to be saying to God, "You like praise. Do this for me and you shall have some". (Reflections on the Psalms, p. 77ff)

To be ordered to do anything stimulates the revolutionary - or at least the adolescent rebel in many of us. Some of us dig our heels in, almost in anticipation of a command. Some of us aren't sure anything honest and authentic can be commanded from us against our will. An important turning point in the spiritual pilgrimage of many of us happened when, in maturity, we finally discovered God does not need our act of praise, worship, thanksgiving, so much as we need to give it. Something important happens spiritually when we acknowledge that the impulse to go to church, to worship God, is not authentic if it is imposed by an authority outside ourselves. We may go through the motions under those circumstances, but it will not be worship any more than it is gratitude that we get when we force our children to say "thank you."

God doesn't need our worship. The need is all ours - to be fully human by placing our lives in the context of God's love and then giving expression to the feelings that are generated. C. S. Lewis said it eloquently:

> "God is that object to admire which is to be awake...not to appreciate which is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all. The incomplete and crippled lives of those who are tone deaf, have never been in love, never known true friendship, never cared for a good book, never enjoyed the feel of the morning air on their cheeks, are faint images of it." (Ibid, p.79)

And so, upon reflection, the Bible's position does seem to be the one which is in our best interests by insisting that we praise, adore and thank God. It is urging us to do the very thing that makes us most human. Lewis wrote, "praise almost seems to be inner health made audible." And the late

Eric Routley, salty British church musician, "Take away a man's capacity for praise and you have him well on the way to hell." (Hymns and the Faith, p.26)

The sorriest, saddest people I know are those who feel no gratitude, who feel in debt to no one, who have lost the capacity to be overwhelmed by the goodness or grace of anything, people who have become incapable of making a joyful noise about much of anything.

How is it, do you suppose, that religious people who have all that impetus going for them, nevertheless turn out sometimes to be morose, grim, tight-lipped joylessness. With all that behind us, how is it that "Presbyterian" is sometimes a synonym for joyless, juiceless, piety? With all the cymbals crashing, hand clapping, joyful noise, in our background, how is it that so much religious singing sounds like a communal lament? It is an exaggeration, of course, but a Puritan has been defined as a person who is worried that someone somewhere is having fun.

Perhaps the reason is that we believe secularism is so rampant and God so absent, that we are relegated to fighting a rear-guard battle, giving society's minority report. Perhaps the mainline church is so defensive about our basic position that there isn't much joy left in us. Perhaps our problem is that at the point of the Biblical premise - "The Lord is God" - we have a theological crisis. The world doesn't seem to believe that any more. Oh, people can get worked up about reading an innocuous prayer over the P.A. system in school, or whether the symbol of the Christian religion can be displayed on facilities that are owned by all the people, Christians and non-Christians. But those are not truly theological issues, not even religious issues. Those are arguments about freedom and what it means to live in a free society... Curiously, many of the folks who insist on state supported religion, don't go to church. And many who oppose public religion are precisely those who are secure in their own faith. Nevertheless, we know our culture is secular, and then we assume that no one is listening, that we must give our lives to do grim, determined battle with godlessness. And perhaps that is why the noise coming from institutional religion rarely sounds joyful.

Our assumptions, however, appear not to be good ones. A transition is happening out there. Twelve years ago Harvey Cox wrote a book The Secular City. Two years ago he wrote the sequel: Religion in the Secular City. The University of Pennsylvania asked all applicants last year to identify and write an essay about the person in history, real or fictional, with whom they would like to spend an evening. To everyone's surprise, Jesus came in third, God was second. First place went to Lee Iacocca - who is in pretty good company these days.

I was privileged once to attend a seminar led by the famous futurist, and Director of the Hudson Institute, Herman Kahn. He was an extraordinarily bright and inventive thinker. Government and business people listened to him talk about possible scenarios for the future. In the seminar I attended someone asked him if he believed in God. He said, "At sixteen I was an atheist. At twenty-five I was agnostic. At thirty-five I became a deist. The way I'm going I'll soon be a rabbi."

Kahn's pilgrimage is familiar. Rationalism fooled us. We actually believed we knew all there was to know - or soon would: that human intellect will comprehend it all. All it takes is time. But the scientists themselves aren't saying that anymore. In fact, the scientists are the new advocates for the old religious virtues of humility, awe, reverence before the mystery of the unknown. That use to be religious vocabulary... Today they are the vocabulary of the physicist, astronaut, micro-biologist.

A wonderful transition is in process. The world is listening - to see if there is joyful noise being made by anyone about God.

Well there can be - and sometimes there is, in spite of our self-restraint. Two Sundays ago seven infants received the Sacrament of Baptism and the majority of them protested with fervor. The parents were horrified, the congregation was delighted. Babies cried, howled: people laughed. It was wonderful. It was the most joyful noise I can think of. It was utterly reverent, the sanctity of life was celebrated and a good time was had by all. My guess - my confidence - is that God laughed too.

We can, in fact, be more intentional abut it. We can, in fact, express the joy in us. The joyful noise in worship does not have to be confined to sentimental 19th century hymns about death and dying with full vibrato on the organ. We don't have to teach our children that reverence is essentially the same thing as sadness, that going to worship and going to a funeral are really much the same thing. Where is it written that worship should be boring, monotonous? At the heart of it after all is something so utterly good, there are no words happy enough to contain it.

Madeline L'Engle writes: "We are not meant to cringe before God, or to call on Jesus to come and save us from an angry, vengeful Father. We are to enjoy all the delights which the Lord has given us, sunsets and sunrises, and a baby's first laugh, and friendship and love, and the brilliance of the stars". [A Stone for a Pillow, p. 26)

Now, the Bible is not talking about superficial frivolity when it suggests joyful noise to God. It is not proposing a massive dose of positive thinking that ignores suffering and evil. In fact, in the most remarkable way, the Bible puts into words the very questions that haunt us. "Why?" Job asks. "What have I done to deserve this?" " "Why do the evil prosper" asked the Psalmist. And while we're at it, "why hunger, injustice, war, cancer, death." "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus wanted to know in the hour of his own death.

The remarkable thing about the Bible is that it does not offer pat answers to the authentically difficult questions we ask. The Bible does not blame God for human suffering, but rather advocates a radical freedom in which accidents occur and bad things happen to good people. What the Bible is bold and consistent to proclaim is that the Lord is God - and that God's love endures forever.

That's the critical difference with Biblical faith. The Bible does not tie its theology to good fortune, good health, victory in battle, or full barns. That's how religion operated until a Hebrew prophet once

suggested that God loves and cares for his people, particularly when things are not going well for them. The Psalms, one quickly discovers, were written mostly, out of a trust that the God of history was going to transform a bad situation into a hopeful one. The Jews gave the world the idea that God can be seen and worshipped even in suffering, sickness and defeat. The Jews gave the world one of their sons, whose death we believe is a demonstration of God's love and the occasion not only for tears of lament - but tears of joy and Hallelujah choruses lifted to the heavens.

Just as the light of a candle is more visible, more dramatic when surrounded by darkness, so joy and gratitude become powerful testimony when they emerge in the midst of tragedy. Someone, somehow scribbled on the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto:

"I believe in the sun, even if it does not shine.
I believe in love, even if I do not feel it.
I believe in God, even if I do not see him"

And Anne Frank, at her last Hanukkah: "We have so much for which to be thankful. Let us praise God!" ...And Abraham Lincoln, establishing a national day of Thanksgiving in the middle of a heartbreaking Civil War, and Washington, on eight separate occasions, calling the early Americans to prayers of gratitude and, of course, back before all that...that pathetic little band of Christians who had buried most of their friends, relatives and children the winter before, perched precariously on the edge of a mysterious and threatening and utterly new world, celebrating a Thanksgiving! They knew what they were about. They knew the meaning of the hundredth Psalm.

All of them - and all of us who have wondered at the sheer goodness of God, who have known steady grace in adversity - and who have felt gratitude within us, are urged, called and given opportunity this week, to make joyful noises... They might not be loud... In fact, they might be very quiet - personal -

I love you...

I need you...

Thank you...

They are part of that wonderful, ancient mandate...

"All people that on earth do dwell, Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice... Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell... Come ye before Him and rejoice..."

Lord of all being, we would give expression to the gratitude that is in us. Hear our thanksgiving this week - our joyful noise and our tentative expressions. Bless the love and laughter of our celebration and remind us again of your steadfastness and your love to all generations: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.